

POST-COLD WAR RUSSIAN REVISIONISM AND CONSPIRATORIAL
THINKING: REVEALING CENTURIES OF STATE SECURITY AND
INTELLIGENCE DEPENDENCE

by
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Abstract

The purpose of this research study is to draw attention to the lack of academic concentration on the connection between revisionist thinking in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the contemporary structure of the intelligence apparatus. This is not a well-studied area in academia, yet it has considerable importance, especially for nations like the United States that have a vested interest in knowing Russia's modus operandi well. This research study seeks to provide evidence of the claim that conspiracies about the collapse of the USSR that were spread in the post-Soviet era to some degree dictate contemporary Russian intelligence operations, especially those conducted against the United States. Further, it aims to incorporate Russia's ambivalence towards dispelling these conspiracy theories as evidence of revising history in order to suit contemporary political needs, which is a common crime committed by many states around the world. When Russia uses this tool with the purpose of brainwashing its own population into believing the revisionist history championed by historians and ex-government officials, especially that surrounding significant state failures, it further legitimizes an 'us-against-them' mentality. The presence of this conspiracy-fueled thinking is a well-established topic within academia, both in Russian studies and psychology in general, but there has yet to be a link drawn between this knowledge and its effects on contemporary Russian intelligence operations.

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Introduction

The belief in conspiracy theories is a phenomenon that is omnipresent in world history, regardless of country. The tendency of the human brain to search for explanations to traumatic events or to evade blame for failures is completely natural. When this type of thinking occurs in state leaders at a national level, it has effects on the longevity and veracity of conspiracy theories. National level mistakes have catastrophic consequences for the entire country, so for a leader to take responsibility for the mistake is not only difficult but also against self-preservation. National leaders can be the subject of intense public scrutiny and be at risk of losing re-election if they admit to mistakes. World leaders are not immune to searching for corollary explanations for a national failure that often places blame on a third party. They may choose to obscure the true source of blame in order to preserve some of their innocence and national pride or they may act out of inaction by not disproving conspiracy theories directly. By handling a disaster in this manner, world leaders contribute to the misrepresentation of history and cultivate an environment in which conspiratorial thinking thrives.

A prominent example of this is the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991. The USSR was a nation with a history saturated with historical perversions and conspiracy-driven ideological frameworks. The question driving this research is as follows: How does Russian revisionist thinking regarding the collapse of the Soviet Union influence contemporary Russian intelligence decision making and operational frameworks? This research study aims to show that the

popularity of these conspiratorial frameworks exploded drastically after the 1991 collapse. Thus, the original hypothesis for this paper is that Russian revisionist thinking regarding the collapse of the Soviet Union influences contemporary Russian intelligence decision making and operational frameworks.

The main sections of this paper include information regarding scholarship on the theories surrounding the collapse of the USSR, the role of revisionist history in the evolution of the Russian intelligence apparatus, the nature of and psychology behind conspiracy theories in Russia, and how these ideas contribute to the behavior of contemporary Russian intelligence. These ideas are all connected by their contributions to the evolution of the Russian state. Exploring these contributions through existing scholarship, a case study, and historical analysis illuminates the fact that the aforementioned sections relate to one another in the sense that they all contribute to the contemporary behavior of Russian intelligence.

Various scholarly works focus on any one of the many factors that contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union or the pervasiveness of conspiratorial thinking in Russia's history. However, none seek to explain how understanding why Russia's world view developed as it did could be helpful for adversarial governments and intelligence services. This was a main gap that this research study attempted to fill, but there was not enough evidence to support this connection. A clearer picture of how conspiratorial thinking in Russians affects intelligence operations could not be painted after compiling the myriad of scholarly works on the presence of conspiracy thinking in politics, Russian history, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and contemporary intelligence structures. One goal was to be able to look at this comprehensive history taking into account

conspiratorial thinking and create a basis for a predictive behavior framework for nations with a vested interest in Russia, such as the United States. Ultimately, proving this aspect of the original hypothesis turned out to be unfeasible; however, the research did support the fact that conspiracies regarding the collapse of the Soviet Union are prevalent. Additionally, the research supported the claim that these theories were especially prevalent after the Soviet Union dissolved. However, the research disproved that these conspiracy theories emerged and caused new change in the contemporary intelligence structure, as was expected. Instead, the research supported the idea that the behavior of intelligence in Russia has remained largely unchanged for hundreds of years and is the backbone of the Russian state.

The circumstances of Russia's development as a nation have led to a pervasive and persistent 'us-against-them' mentality that began with national leaders and leaked all the way down to ordinary citizens. "Russia's historical instability has prompted its rulers to continually fear subversion from both foreign and domestic enemies. One need only to look at iconic Russian symbols to see that the tsars viewed themselves as being under siege."¹ In the centuries before the Cold War, Russia dealt with constant pressure from foreign threats due to geographic vulnerability and ideologically motivated battles with neighbors far and near. In the post-Cold War era, Russia continues to struggle by failing to adapt to the new liberal international order.²

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union had a strong and loud presence on the global stage, but the country's weariness of the West was at an all-time high because of

¹ Bateman, Aaron. 2014. "The Political Influence of the Russian Security Services." *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 27 (3): 380–403. doi:10.1080/13518046.2014.932626. Pg 381.

² Richey, Mason. 2018. "Contemporary Russian Revisionism: Understanding the Kremlin's Hybrid Warfare and the Strategic and Tactical Deployment of Disinformation." *Asia Europe Journal* 16 (1): 101–13. Pg 101.

the ideological and physical threats it posed. Historically, Russia solved the perceived threat to its way of life and world view with increased and invasive national security measures, from the time of the tsars up until the present day.³ “The state security apparatus has been the primary means of protecting the rule of the tsar, later the head of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and now the President of the Russian Federation.”⁴ This paranoid view of constant ideological threats, particularly those from the West, has created a deep dependence upon intelligence, national security, and domestic counterintelligence to maintain the governmental leadership.

In Russia, this dependence has lasted through multiple structural changes in government. Creating, spreading, and nurturing conspiratorial views of malicious Western intentions towards Russia is one of the main ways this dependence is solidified. While it is untrue that the Russian government is the sole creator and promulgator of conspiracy theories that support such ideas, it does play a role in dissemination, mainly through the voices of former KGB officials’ publications in the post-Soviet era. When there is an underlying society-wide belief that the West has traditionally been the main offender of employing malicious ideological campaigns against Russia, the Russian government can more easily evade blame for any failures, past or present. In the case of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian government disseminated a myriad of conspiracy theories by word of mouth that explained why the union had collapsed, most of which refused to accept full blame. Instead, theories such as ‘The Dulles Plan’ emerged from former Soviet officials in the form of books or other publications. This

³ Bateman, 381.

⁴ *Ibid.*

conspiracy theory is the most famous in Russia, showing up in court as a legitimate citation despite the fact that an actual hard copy of ‘The Dulles Plan’ has never been produced in Russia. The basis of its accusation is that the United States attempted to undermine the Soviet Union through ideological warfare and the use of agents of influence in order to eradicate Russian culture and ultimately bring down the USSR.⁵ “... [t]his fake document has been more influential in shaping the Russian popular historical consciousness and memory of the Cold War than any of the reams of genuine archival documents that have been declassified in recent decades.”⁶ The presence of such conspiracy theories confirms two ideas. First, abusing history for contemporary political gain by allowing the growth of conspiracy theories is a deeply entrenched Russian practice. Second, this has created a high dependence on security services in order to preserve the Russian way of life. Thus, it would seem likely that the contemporary Russian intelligence apparatus is still operating under a similar rhetoric and if so, will make future decisions based off this. However, as the research will show, conspiratorial thinking is still prevalent but does not affect intelligence decision making. Despite this, knowing the reasons for the existence of such world views and the level of dependence upon the state security services is still useful for countries like the United States in understanding a critical adversary. Building off of Russia’s history, it is likely that some remnants of this ‘us-against-them’ mentality still exist in modern intelligence behavior, but it is less likely that this type of mindset affects how Russians make decisions.

⁵ Fedor, Julie. 2011. “Chekists Look Back on the Cold War: The Polemical Literature.” *Intelligence & National Security* 26 (6): 842–63. doi:10.1080/02684527.2011.619800. Pg 843.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Literature Review

This research study will attempt to forge a connection between Russian revisionist thinking beginning at the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and how this affects current Russian intelligence behavior. There is an abundance of scholarly works that analyze the extent to which the Russian government romanticizes, misremembers, and thus purposefully abuses history in order to serve its interests. For the most part, these works focus on Russia's past because it allows the researcher to see the misapplication from start to finish. Because the existing scholarship agrees that this revisionist thinking is a culturally ingrained mindset extant from Russia's inception, this paper will attempt to apply this idea to understanding contemporary Russian intelligence behavior. A major factor that drives this research is discovering whether there is a dearth of scholarship on this specific topic because a connection does not exist or it has not yet been explored.

The concept of misremembering history needs to be understood as a whole before discerning how willfully misremembering history occurs in Russia specifically. This phenomenon is not new to the academic research world so there are plenty of peer-reviewed articles from which to work. For example, Robert Strayer's book "Why Did the Soviet Union Collapse?: Understanding Historical Change" succinctly outlines the process that this research seeks to explore.

In the first place, historical reflection reminds us of the many ways in which the past shapes and restricts the actions of people in the present, even if they are wholly unaware of it. The agenda of the Gorbachev reform program was largely a response to the legacy of Stalinism and invoked an even earlier Leninist version of the Soviet experience. The Stalin era in turn perpetuated in many ways the heritage of the tsarist political system that preceded it. And Russian autocracy of the late nineteenth century can hardly be understood without reference to the cultural heritage of Byzantium, the Mongol invasions of early Russia, or the reforms of Peter the

Great. Thus, the past poses the problems those living in the present must confront, and it limits the alternatives available to them. Such a view of historical legacies highlights the constraints under which all of us operate and emphasizes the limits of human freedom.⁷

Understanding this thought process is key to grasping one major section of this research. That is the idea that past behaviors, beliefs, or world views have the potential to affect contemporary decision making. Strayer clearly denotes how Russia's specific history affects each successive ruler. This information is important to this research because it will help either prove or disprove the idea that historical experience and the subsequent world views specifically affect Russian intelligence behavior.

The scholarship on this general idea agrees that the phenomenon occurs most often in major world players, especially if they are facing a failure. There are many examples of this throughout history, especially in the United States, China, and Russia. The most prominent example in Russia's history is, of course, the collapse of the Soviet Union. The major idea at the nucleus of the scholarship surrounding Russian revisionist thinking is that it has existed since the beginnings of the nation in the 14th century, and it creates a cultural 'us-against-the-world' mentality. This serves the government because by allowing the spread of this mentality, nationalism rises and increases public support for the ruler. Various schools of thought regarding the collapse of the Soviet Union and to what degree revisionist thinking played a role are built from the general agreements about the aforementioned phenomena.

⁷ Strayer, Robert. *Why Did the Soviet Union Collapse?: Understanding Historical Change*. 1st ed. New York, NY: Routledge, 1998.

Schools of Thought Regarding the Collapse of the Soviet Union

The biggest disparity in schools of thought regarding the Soviet collapse is between the Western-based view and the Non-Western-based view. Understanding the difference between the two schools of thought is important because it shows that one school of thought foments conspiracy while the other does not. Sampling from the sources used for this project, scholars debate the most over the reasons for the Soviet collapse. In general, Western scholars believe it to be the result of poor governing and economic policy on the part of the Soviets while Russians tend to point to external factors being the cause.⁸ Two sources with opposing viewpoints on the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent reactions within the government are from Western scholars Amy Knight and Aaron Bateman. Knight authored “The KGB, Perestroika, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union” and Aaron Bateman wrote “The Political Influence of the Russian Security Services”. Knight asserts that the Soviet Union’s security apparatus could not operate independently within the government and therefore the Committee of State Security (KGB) did not have any influence over Gorbachev and the disintegration of the USSR.⁹ Conversely, Bateman’s article outlines the ways that the KGB was deeply intertwined with the Gorbachev government. It also incorporates a detailed history of how the internal security apparatus is culturally ingrained within Russian society.¹⁰ Knight and Bateman’s opposing stances are significant because they show the difference

⁸ Although there are many publications on the classic debate for the reasons of the collapse of the USSR, that is not the aim of this paper. The common explanations, such as poor economic policy, weak governance, and high levels of social dismay are all part of the Western-based school of thought. Many books and articles have been written on this topic. However, this paper aims to focus on why the Russians believe the USSR fell, highlighting specifically the conspiratorial aspect of their viewpoint.

⁹ Knight, Amy. 2003. “The KGB, Perestroika, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union.” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 5 (1): 67–93. doi:10.1162/152039703320996722. Pg 68.

¹⁰ Bateman, 381.

of viewpoints in not only the causes of the collapse but also the behavior of the intelligence apparatus. Knight argues that it was untrue that the KGB's interests were considered in the matters of politics while Bateman argues the opposite.

The article by Michal Bilewicz et al. entitled "Traumatic Rift: How Conspiracy Beliefs Undermine Cohesion After Societal Trauma?" explores the same idea found in Bateman's article. Their position is that the corruption and entrenchment that was rampant in the Soviet government, partially due to the invasiveness of the security apparatus, played a leading role in the collapse of the Soviet Union and the following social trauma.¹¹ Bilewicz et al. argue that this trauma and division worsens with the spread of conspiracies after a catastrophic event.¹² This conclusion also appears in the work of Stefanie Ortmann and John Heathershaw, where they state that the spread of conspiracies became prevalent even outside of Soviet borders after the collapse.¹³ Bilewicz and the co-authors of this article performed a national survey and study in Poland after the death of a president in a plane crash and found the populous was more inclined to believe conspiratorial explanations than those based in fact.¹⁴ The overall conclusion is that when an unthinkable trauma occurs, people tend to look for corollary explanations that fit with the ideas already ingrained in their minds.

A Russian publication entitled *The Daily Report* ran a section called *The Cold War: Global Perspectives on East-West Tensions*. One of the articles written in 1991 by

¹¹ Bilewicz, Michal, Marta Witkowska, Myrto Pantazi, Theofilos Gkinopoulos, and Olivier Klein. 2019. "Traumatic Rift: How Conspiracy Beliefs Undermine Cohesion After Societal Trauma?" *Europe's Journal of Psychology* 15 (1): 82–93. doi:10.5964/ejop.v15i1.1699. Pg 82.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Ortmann, Stefanie and John Heathershaw. "Conspiracy Theories in the Post-Soviet Space." *Russian Review* 71, no. 4 (2012): 551-64. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23263929>, Pg 551.

¹⁴ Bilewicz, 81.

Sabri Hammadi was titled “Gorbachev Held Responsible for USSR Collapse: Is What Gorbachev Has Done a Gamble or a Conspiracy?”. Although a Russian did not write this article, it addresses the common struggle faced by Russian citizens in 1991 in discerning whether Gorbachev was a Western pawn. The article also displays the two schools of thought regarding the Soviet collapse while highlighting the conspiratorial aspect of the non-Western-based view.¹⁵

Misapplications of History’s Lessons

In terms of analyzing the general phenomenon of misapplying lessons from history, James Judis wrote a succinct article entitled “Imperial Amnesia” on how the United States misremembered and tailored history to its current political needs in the case of the Philippines in 2003. Judis states that on a visit to the islands, former president George W. Bush recounted the events that led to Philippine independence through a revisionist lens that augmented the positive reaction of the Philippine people to U.S. actions.¹⁶ In reality, the Philippine people viewed the United States’ involvement unfavorably. Judis asserts that this type of thinking is pervasive throughout foreign policy history, especially when it involves ignoring a national failure.¹⁷ He uses political speeches to uphold the fact that there is a difference in how governments portray their actions and how they are perceived in the context of historical action. Further elaborating on this idea of revisionism in history, Judis cites the example of the U.S. and Iraq.

¹⁵ This research yielded surprisingly sparse results for articles explaining the reasons behind the Soviet collapse as written by Russians. There were Russian publications with articles written by non-Russians on this topic, such as Hammadi’s article, but Russians seem reticent to address the topic directly and openly. Needless to say, this was a hindrance to this research study.

¹⁶ Judis, John B. 2004. “Imperial Amnesia.” *Foreign Policy*, no. 143 (July): 50. Pg 50.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 52.

For his part, Bush declared during an April 2004 press conference that, in invading and occupying Iraq, the United States had not acted as “an imperial power,” but as a “liberating power.” To be sure, the United States has not attempted to make Iraq part of a new, formal U.S. empire. But the invasion and occupation conformed perfectly to the variant of imperialism pioneered by the United States in Cuba and by the British in the Middle East.¹⁸

This framework is useful because imperialism to the United States is what victimization is to Russia. While the United States attempts to frame their actions in a manner that covers up blatant imperialism because most other nations see it as unfavorable, Russia attempts to cover its history in a veil of struggle caused by an outside threat. This framework echoes that displayed by the Soviets at the end of the USSR.

Another incident of misconstrued history that involves former president George W. Bush is his comparison of Osama Bin Laden to Adolf Hitler. Peter Conolly-Smith writes in “Connecting the Dots’: Munich, Iraq, and the Lessons of History” that this is a prime example of policy makers misapplying history to augment their current positions, which in turn distorts the public’s views of the past. Conolly-Smith argues that the U.S. uses misremembering and misapplying historical lessons as justification for American militarized intervention and has done so for decades.¹⁹ Conolly-Smith states his methodology as recounting and analyzing the events before and during the Munich incident and then interpreting the manners by which these events served as justification for future U.S. foreign policy.²⁰ This framework is useful to this research study because the collapse of the Soviet Union could take the place of the Munich incident in Conolly-Smith’s framework and show its impact on Russian foreign and domestic policy. In

¹⁸ Judis, 57-58.

¹⁹ Conolly-Smith, Peter. 2009. ““Connecting the Dots’: Munich, Iraq, and the Lessons of History.” *History Teacher* 43 (1): 31–51. Pg 33.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 32.

particular, when speaking about how the Munich example affected future American foreign policy, his framework states that one main factor can justify major action. In his example of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Conolly-Smith pinpoints the mistaken intelligence that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction.²¹ In the case of the Soviet Union, the collapse and ensuing conspiracy theories about the reasons behind the collapse stood as justification for continuing to wage ideological warfare against the United States.

Carol Winkler's article "Rational Model for Analyzing U.S. Foreign Policy Advocates and Decision Makers: The Newman Legacy" analyzes the works of Robert P. Newman from the early 20th Century. Winkler and Newman both examined a similar question to that explored by this paper; dissecting the relationship between past and ingrained national world views and their effects on contemporary American foreign policy.²² Winkler's analysis of Newman's work coincides with conclusions drawn in Judis' article in that the United States is known to tailor the past to fit its current needs.²³ However, the utility of Winkler's article comes from one of her main arguments: "Many critical scholars today question whether rational models can serve as a sufficient (or even fitting) process for assessing foreign policy, given the heightened role that emotion and ideology now play in swaying the politicized American public".²⁴ Winkler observes the role of emotion in foreign policy decision making by combing through the rational model of decision-making works of Robert P. Newman. Furthermore, she analyzes his

²¹ Conolly-Smith, 32.

²² Winkler, Carol. 2018. "Rational Model for Analyzing U.S. Foreign Policy Advocates and Decision Makers: The Newman Legacy." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 21 (4): 683–94. Pg 683.

²³ Robert P. Newman with David Deifull, *Invincible Ignorance in American Foreign Policy: The Triumph of Ideology over Evidence* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013).

²⁴ Winkler, 684.

experiences with policy makers in which rational thinking comes second to emotion. To support this claim, Winkler cited Robert P. Newman's experience of publishing a "...well-reasoned, critical examination of American foreign policy..."²⁵ that received high praise from academia and sold 20,000 copies yet did not convince actual policy makers to make any changes. The reason this is highly useful is that assessing emotion and politicization in the same field is relevant to the Soviet Union; many Soviet tactics and policies relied heavily on the emotions and emotional support of its citizenry.

Providing further evidence behind the global phenomenon of misusing history for modern gain is Edward Friedman. He applies the same ideas and frameworks discussed above to China in the post-Mao era in his article "Raising Sheep on Wolf Milk: The Politics and Dangers of Misremembering the Past in China". This work is useful because it shows that this type of conspiratorial and paranoid thinking is pervasive in countries with autocracies or communist regimes, with the exception of the United States because of its world power status. He explores the intricate methods by which Deng Xiaoping attempted to cover up or deny the atrocities of Mao in order to maintain nationalism and his grasp of power while trying to expose China to the global market.²⁶ For the purposes of this research study, the terms 'covering up history' and 'misapplying lessons from history' are both used because they both result in the citizenry having a distorted view of what really occurred. As different countries with varied statuses use this same tactic, it is useful to note that through this research, it seems to be a human tendency rather than a culturally dependent phenomenon. That is not to contradict the fact that great powers or

²⁵ Winkler, 684.

²⁶ Friedman, Edward. 2008. "Raising Sheep on Wolf Milk: The Politics and Dangers of Misremembering the Past in China." *Totalitarian Movements & Political Religions* 9 (2-3): 389-409. doi:10.1080/14690760802095054. Pg 389.

egocentric states more often employ this tactic. It is to say, however, that it seems to be a natural human reticence to accept blame for failure.

The scholarship cited in this research study to analyze how misapplying history affects foreign policy and overlaps with conspiratorial thinking uses a common framework that may be applied across case studies. In general, the approach of scholars attempting to answer this question relies heavily on analyzing historical case studies and surmising how contemporary decisions are reminiscent of this history. John B. Judis cites quotes from American politicians in his article that support the imperialist mindset, which he states has been a staple of American foreign policy and ideology since the time of the founding fathers.²⁷ Similarly, Serguei Oushakine, a non-Western scholar, uses historical analysis to conclude that victimization has been a part of Russian world view beginning in the pre-Soviet years and extending through the 20th century.²⁸ Oushakine uses a multitude of historical methods to piece together how conspiracy within Russia is used as a coping mechanism for national loss and failure.

Individual biographies are merged with historical narratives about battlefields and spilled blood, while the state and the motherland become symbiotically indistinguishable. Perhaps more important is that this triangulation of the self, loss, and the nation state is framed within a larger context of the experienced vulnerability or imagined threat.²⁹

Here, it is clear that operationalizing emotion in foreign policy is evidenced in Russia by both personal and political autobiographies. Additionally, Oushakine mentions the

²⁷ Judis, 58.

²⁸ Oushakine, Serguei Alex. 2009. ““Stop the Invasion!”: Money, Patriotism, and Conspiracy in Russia.” *Social Research* 76 (1): 71. Pg 72.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 74.

importance of the perceived threat, which in the case of this research study is the West, in Russia's foreign policy.

Although these sources each use slightly different discrete examples, the conceptual frameworks are applicable to different cases because of the psychological aspect behind the decision-making. For example, the reasons for misapplying history to suit a current political need or searching for a coping mechanism for a national failure are well-established psychological processes. The methodology used to garner information from these sources shows that revisionist history and conspiracy theories are not only superficial political tools but are also a fundamental part of how societies view their own histories. Thus, the frameworks and methods set forth by the authors of the aforementioned scholarship are useful in determining whether or not the collapse of the Soviet Union spurred a new age of conspiratorial thinking or if it exposed an extant Russian historical practice.

The Science and Psychology of Conspiracy Thinking

An exceedingly helpful article that provides the neuroscience behind this kind of historical perversion on the human level is "The Effects of Illusory Truth" by Gleb Tsipursky. He notes that when a brain hears a lie repeatedly and consistently, it perceives this lie to be true.³⁰ Although Tsipursky uses the 2016 American presidential election and Donald Trump's rhetoric specifically as a case study, his analysis and the science behind it could be applicable to the Soviet Union and its leaders at the time of the collapse. This is because the Soviets painted the collapse to be the result of a Western plot to destroy the USSR, a story that was repeated to the public. It eventually manifested itself in the form

³⁰ Tsipursky, Gleb. 2017. "The Effects of Illusory Truth." *Human Prospect* 6 (2): 32–41. Pg 33.

of conspiracy theories from officials themselves, stories that even reached publication. The science that Tsipursky uses in his analysis can be applied to those who led the Soviet Union as well because human brains generally function similarly on a neurological level. At the time of the collapse, government and intelligence officials alike did not want to accept blame for economic and social failures, so instead they pointed blame at the West.

The study done by Monika Grzesiak-Feldman and Anna Ejsmont on “Paranoia and Conspiracy Thinking of Jews, Arabs, Germans, and Russians in a Polish Sample” validates the positive correlation between conspiratorial thinking and paranoia. In the example of Russia, paranoia is the basis for the ‘us-against-them’ mentality that has been seen throughout the country’s history. The authors of the study conclude that conspiracy thinking is especially high in governments where egocentrism is prevalent.³¹ As evidenced by the inability to take responsibility for failures, this applies to both the Soviet government and Putin’s Russia, as Putin stated in a 2005 State of the Nation address that the collapse of the Soviet Union was one of the worst events to occur in the 20th century.³² This statement suggests a belief that the country under Soviet control was in its prime, a bias that has the potential to affect decision making in contemporary Russia.

Summation

After reviewing the existing scholarship on this topic, one major area is still yet to be explored. Drawing connections between past misuses of history on the part of the

³¹ Grzesiak-Feldman, Monika, and Anna Ejsmont. “Paranoia and Conspiracy Thinking of Jews, Arabs, Germans, and Russians in a Polish Sample.” *Psychological Reports* 102, no. 3 (June 2008): 884–86. doi:10.2466/pr0.102.3.884-886. Pg 884.

³² Sanders, Katie. "Did Vladimir Putin Call the Breakup of the USSR 'the Greatest Geopolitical Tragedy of the 20th Century?'" *Punditfact*. March 6, 2014. <https://www.politifact.com/punditfact/statements/2014/mar/06/john-bolton/did-vladimir-putin-call-breakup-ussr-greatest-geop/>.

Russians and applying this pattern of behavior to contemporary policy still has yet to be addressed by much of the academic community. Attempting to use this framework in order to make sense of the contemporary Russian intelligence structure would help American policy makers better understand a primary adversary. Given this unexplored avenue, this research supported the fact that policy makers purposefully manipulate and misapply historical precedents in order to serve their contemporary political needs. Specifically, this is seen in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union when the popularity of conspiracy theories and nationalism spiked, as is proven by the mass publication of such theories.

Conspiracy theories continued to abound during the Soviet period, not least as part of narratives of the demonization of the Western or Soviet “Other” that fed upon one another, proliferating in a climate of mutual distrust that gave rise to narrative structures that could equally be found in a John Le Carré novel and in purportedly more sombre official reports.³³

Stephanie Ortmann and John Heathershaw provide affirmation that this field is miraculously unstudied for the potential that it has to inform decision makers on the Russian psyche. They also address the fact that using historical precedents can be applicable to contemporary Russian intelligence operational frameworks. “In recent years, there has been a proliferation of conspiracy theories in Russia and the FSU, visible in the public sphere in a raft of publications and dedicated “conspirology” shelves in Russian bookstores”.³⁴ This is the most salient evidence showing that even today, deep-rooted conspiratorial thinking is prevalent in the public sphere. The aim of this paper is to use these aforementioned sources to provide a path through which previous misuses of

³³ Ortmann, 551.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

history by Russian officials are better understood in connection to conspiracy theories, contemporary policy, and intelligence behavior.

Methods

If the data so supports, there should be evidence of a change in the behavior of the Russian security apparatus after the collapse of the Soviet Union when conspiracy theories spiked in popularity. A general history of conspiratorial thinking and abuses of history is discussed to establish historical precedent. In order to evaluate whether the conspiracy theories had an effect on the behavior of Russian intelligence, ‘The Dulles Plan’ will be used to as a case study.³⁵ First, however, to provide background knowledge, an overview of the modern Russian intelligence structures will be provided. Next, the significance of this structure is outlined in order to provide understanding of the progression of Russian intelligence and origins of world views.

In proceeding, some clarity is needed on certain aspects of the study in order to create a more comprehensive framework. Misremembering history and misusing history are terms used to describe the natural human inability to remember everything perfectly, especially chronological events, without bias. In other words, inherently flawed memories cause misremembering history, which in turn contributes to misusing history. These misunderstandings of history color the ability of current leaders to make objective decisions.

³⁵ There are many other conspiracy theories that exist around the collapse of the Soviet Union, but the only one to make an appearance in any level of government is the Dulles Plan. This theory is the most influential and referred to as fact in the court system despite the lack of underlying proof that it actually exists. Other conspiracy theories have not risen to this level of notoriety and therefore are not used in a research study about the effects of conspiracy in Russian intelligence.

Furthermore, defining several key terms is necessary to understanding the intentions of this research study. The term world view is used to denote Russia's general attitude towards the international community and how its people perceive the world around them. The term conspiracy theory is used to reference specific theories, such as 'The Dulles Plan', or other similar theories. The term conspiratorial thinking is used when referring to belief in an uncommon theory or historical explanation. Additionally, the term is used to explain the type of mindset and world view inclined to create and believe theories such as 'The Dulles Plan'. The difference between conspiracy theory and misusing history is small, but for the purposes of this research study, it is important. When referring to misusing history, the offending individuals are more likely to be aware of their offense or have intentionally searched for a vulnerable piece of history to exploit in order to support a current policy. A conspiracy theory is a pervasive idea that is widely believed that seeks to explain a difficult piece of the past, often mistaking coincidence for causality. The term paranoid thinking represents an overly suspicious or distrustful mentality.

For Russia specifically, the term revisionist thinking refers to the misuse of history, particularly when addressing the collapse of the Soviet Union. Additionally, paranoia or paranoid thinking is used when referring to Russia in conjunction with its "us-against-them" world view. When referring to the Russian or American intelligence community as a whole, the term intelligence structure is utilized to highlight the different agencies and their relationships to one another. Intelligence behavior refers to the 'personality' of the intelligence agency or its typical modus operandi. Finally, the term

operational framework is used to refer to the operational functioning and mandate of any intelligence bureaucracy.

The goal in conducting this research study is to find out if there is evidence within the contemporary Russian intelligence or political structures that shows the integration of past misuses of history into intelligence behavior. For example, is there any evidence that conspiracy theories such as ‘The Dulles Plan’ and the accompanying world views are present and driving factors behind Russian intelligence activity towards the West? Furthermore, have Russian leaders have ever referred to conspiracy theories or used conspiratorial rhetoric in public speeches? There is potentially a correlating line between statements that policy makers are willing to say publicly and the policy that drives intelligence operations. Because the public statement of a policy maker is attributable to their platform, it follows that this platform’s framework would be used to govern bodies such as the intelligence community. Evidence of conspiracy-driven intelligence operations would be difficult to find as it is likely classified. However, the ideal proof would be in the collection requirements behind intelligence operations against American targets. If there is evidence that Russian intelligence activities are still motivated by the paranoid thinking that spurred ‘The Dulles Plan’, then it can likely be concluded that this ideological framework has survived for centuries and will continue to do so in the future.

This research study is not seeking to prove that the Russian government itself is creating and disseminating conspiracy theories, but instead that it is somewhat of an inadvertent accomplice to spreading existing conspiracy theories. Theoretically, this is because the Russian government consists of Russian citizens who were socialized with Russian culture throughout their upbringing. Due to the fact that conspiracy theories

surrounding the collapse of the Soviet Union are prevalent, it is likely that current policy makers are aware of or even believe these theories. Thus, it follows that policy makers house a bias shaped by conspiracy theories that could affect the policy they make. If the research so supports, then it is likely that the type of thinking that has been a staple of the Russian psyche since the early 1990s was responsible for the creation of the non-Western-based school of thought regarding the collapse of the Soviet Union. “Theorists in this tradition have attempted to understand conspiracy theories as a reflection of the postmodern condition, a deep anxiety over a widespread loss of agency”.³⁶ Losing its state status in 1991 was a traumatic event for Soviet officials and citizens alike. For this reason, it is likely that there will be sufficient evidence to support the claim that after an event such as this, levels of conspiratorial thinking and nationalism rise significantly. Additionally, if these factors are proven, then it is probable that there is a connection between Russia’s actual history, its revised history, and the way the intelligence apparatus is currently run.

There is also a possibility that no connection such as this exists beyond a corollary one. If there is no way to find out whether or not current intelligence activity is influenced by revisionist historical thinking largely resultant of trauma from the 1991 Soviet collapse, then it will be difficult to prove the original hypothesis of this research study. In addition, if no such link can be proven, then the use of this avenue for U.S. policy makers to better understand their adversary would be a dead end. As supported by the previous historiography, not many scholars have attempted to pursue the connection between Russia’s revisionist history and contemporary operating structures, nor has there

³⁶ Ortman, 554.

been a great demand for it. For these reasons, it is possible that the idea does not carry a great deal of utility for American policy makers. However, delving into this topic may serve to support the existing scholarship that does believe there is a need to pursue this connection.

Data

Modern Russian Perceptions of the Soviet Era

Many public opinion polls have been conducted with the purpose of discerning how the Soviet era is perceived in contemporary Russia. Due to the degree of difficulty in accessing official Russian documents about the Soviet collapse, these polls are the most direct way of gauging how and to what degree the Soviet era has been romanticized since its demise. In terms of this research study, this polling data affirms the fact that there has been an abuse of history in Russia by glorifying the Soviet days. This offense caused 21st century Russian citizens to view it as a golden age for their country. Additionally, this data exposes the vulnerability of Russian society to conspiracy theories. The acting Prime Minister of Russia in the early 1990s, Yegor Gaidar, wrote about various factors for the collapse, including this romanticization.

The second was the disturbing tendency to mythologize the late Soviet period in current Russian society and popular culture. These myths include the belief that, despite its problems, the Soviet Union was a dynamically developing world superpower until usurpers initiated disastrous reforms. At least 80% of Russians are convinced of this flawed interpretation of history.³⁷

³⁷ Gaidar, Yegor. "The Soviet Collapse: Grain and Oil." *American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research*. April 2007. http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/20070419_Gaidar.pdf.

This passage shows the ease with which these myths are spread and the significant impact they have on Russian society.

It is one aim of this research study to show that these beliefs in false or romanticized history can lead to an environment that perpetuates feuds over world views and foments belief in conspiracy theories. One poll noted their findings supported this claim. “We found that while Russians are downbeat about their country, they still strongly support President Vladimir Putin, have increasingly negative views about Western countries and leaders, and are nostalgic for the Soviet era.”³⁸ As of 2015, 69% of Russians said that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a negative occurrence.³⁹ As of 2016, 58% of Russian adults saw Josef Stalin in a “mostly” or “very” positive light, while only 22% saw Mikhail Gorbachev that way.⁴⁰ This data corroborates the stance of this paper that most Russians believe the collapse of the Soviet Union was a bad thing and that several believe myths about either the collapse itself or the quality of life under Soviet rule.

Conspiratorial Thinking and the Misuse of History in Russia

At the forefront of the discussion of this phenomenon as it is applied in the case of Russia and the Soviet Union is Julie Fedor’s article, “Chekists Look Back on the Cold War: The Polemical Literature”. In this article, Fedor focuses on the pervasive belief in post-Soviet Russia that the United States was on a mission to undermine the Soviet Union

³⁸ Poushter, Jacob. "6 Charts Showing How Russians See Their Country and the World." Pew Research Center Fact Tank. June 12, 2015. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/06/12/6-charts-showing-how-russians-see-their-country-and-the-world/>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Masci, David. "In Russia, Nostalgia for USSR and Positive Feelings about Stalin." Pew Research Center Fact Tank. June 29, 2017. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/29/in-russia-nostalgia-for-soviet-union-and-positive-feelings-about-stalin/>.

and used such tactics as agents of influence to do so.⁴¹ This conspiracy theory is referred to as ‘The Dulles Plan’ in Russian literature. Other conspiracy theories came out of the collapse of the Soviet Union from previous KGB officers pointing blame at the West for corrupting Soviet leadership as well, but many were self-published with no peer-review process.⁴² This, however, did not stop their release for public consumption. Stefanie Ortmann and John Heathershaw concur in their article “Conspiracy Theories in the Post-Soviet Space” that these ‘Dulles Plan’ style conspiracy theories have been part of Russia’s history since the pre-USSR era. Additionally, they note that comprehending the intricacies of the place of these theories in the Russian worldview is vital to understanding the rise of conspiratorial thinking in other countries and how it plays into the “official discourses of state power”.⁴³ Another article, “Seeing the Bigger Picture: Conspiratorial Revisions of World War II History in Recent Russian Cinema” by Boris Noordenbos, explores the same concept of pointing fingers as mentioned by Fedor. He asserts that Russia’s denial of their failures in World War II is reflected in contemporary Russian movies with a distorted view of the Soviet defeat of Nazism.⁴⁴ Noordenbos concludes that this style of faulty depiction is a conspiratorial method of recontextualizing Soviet/Russian history.⁴⁵ Most notably, Noordenbos states that since

⁴¹ Fedor, 843.

⁴² One of the most interesting, titled “Pochemu USSR?”, was written by an ex-KGB Colonel named Anatoli Rizhnikov. His theory states that the CIA and MI6 obtained intelligence from a Soviet source that proved Gorbachev’s grandparents had ties to Nazism. This information was allegedly used as blackmail to make Gorbachev a pawn of the West because its public exposure could have ended his political career. In the eyes of Rizhnikov, this is the only possible explanation as to why Gorbachev seemingly only made political and economic decisions that did not benefit his own people.

⁴³ Ortmann, 552.

⁴⁴ Noordenbos, Boris. “Seeing the Bigger Picture: Conspiratorial Revisions of World War II History in Recent Russian Cinema.” *Slavic Review* 77, no. 2 (2018): 441–64. doi:10.1017/slr.2018.130., Pg 441.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 442.

the collapse of the Soviet Union, conspiracy has evolved as an independent academic field where it did not exist before.⁴⁶ Noordenobs' article is vital to this research study because it recognizes the importance of understanding the motivations behind conspiratorial thinking.

An abundance of evidence and scholarship documents the history and causes behind conspiratorial thinking. Studies in psychology help us to understand why humans seek solace and explanation in conspiracy theories. Philipp Gerlach et al. note that in their psychological study "The Truth About Lies: A Meta-Analysis on Dishonest Behavior", there are several factors that decide whether a person is prone to dishonesty. "In theory, the prototypical *homo economicus* will engage in dishonesty - even to the maximal possible extent - whenever this behavior pays off."⁴⁷ The authors point out that while this generalization may not always be true because of traits such as integrity, it certainly occurs in human behavior.⁴⁸ One of the most salient points in their experiment comes from the statement at the beginning of their article that voices the public importance of dishonest behavior awareness. "We show that the degree and the magnitude of dishonesty depend on properties of the person (e.g., age, gender) and the context (e.g., the incentive to misreport, the experimental set up)."⁴⁹ These two psychological concepts, the high pay off and the incentive, are particularly applicable to the case of Russia.

Under the authoritarian regimes of Soviet Russia, social unrest was a common and persistent issue that is often cited as one of the main drivers of the nation's collapse.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Gerlach, Philipp, Kinneret Teodorescu, and Ralph Hertwig. 2019. "The Truth about Lies: A Meta-Analysis on Dishonest Behavior." *Psychological Bulletin* 145 (1): 1–44. doi:10.1037/bul0000174.supp (Supplemental). Pg 4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, abstract.

Ilya Yablokov writes in his article “Pussy Riot as Agent Provocateur: Conspiracy Theories and the Media Construction of Nation in Putin’s Russia” that in 2011, mass demonstrations against reforms on social welfare and electoral fraud took place on such a scale that the Kremlin initiated egregious media operations framing them as attempts by the West to undermine Russian sovereignty.⁵⁰ Yablokov notes that this is the first major instance since the collapse of the Soviet Union that the government tried to use the same accusatory tactics against the West to veil its failure to alleviate social unrest.⁵¹ Mason Richey explores this very phenomenon in his article “Contemporary Russian Revisionism: Understanding the Kremlin’s Hybrid Warfare and the Strategic and Tactical Deployment of Disinformation”. Richey explains that Russia’s disinformation campaigns are a long standing and potent part of its political policy because it does not attempt to pass lies as truth, but it undermines the constituents’ very belief in the notion of truthful, objective political facts.⁵² In Yablokov’s example, the Russian government released documentaries that outlined the West’s plot to divide Russia through these demonstrations, effectively perpetuating the historic ‘us-against-them’ rhetoric so pervasive in the Soviet and pre-Soviet eras.

Alexander Libman and Björn Vollen in “Anti-Western Conspiracy Thinking and Expectations of Collusion: Evidence from Russia and China” directly address authoritarian regimes’ propensity for utilizing conspiratorial disinformation campaigns to cause a divide between their citizens and the world. Importantly, Libman and Vollen also

⁵⁰ Yablokov, Ilya. 2014. “Pussy Riot as Agent Provocateur: Conspiracy Theories and the Media Construction of Nation in Putin’s Russia.” *Nationalities Papers* 42 (4): 622–36. doi:10.1080/00905992.2014.923390. Pg 622.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Richey, 101.

note the fact that autocrats often use blaming adversarial nations for their own failures as a way of maintaining hold of their ideology.⁵³ Serguei Oushakine affirms this theory in his article “‘Stop the Invasion!’: Money, Patriotism, and Conspiracy in Russia”. He also speaks about the most prominent conspiracy theory, ‘The Dulles Plan’ that Julie Fedor analyzes in her article. Oushakine’s most salient point is that throughout the 20th Century, Russia painted its own history in the light of victimization. The government perceived each political event as happening to the USSR and that the USSR must fight against every other enemy nation.⁵⁴ Oushakine poignantly concludes that the phenomenon of the Soviet Union taking on the world alone has been deeply ingrained in Russian culture and society for generations.⁵⁵

Russian Intelligence Structure

The contemporary structure of the Russian intelligence system is divided into three main organs. The Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), which was known as The Committee of State Security in Russia (KGB) during the Cold War, is tasked with collecting and storing foreign intelligence.⁵⁶ A second significant organ is Russian Military Intelligence (GRU), which operates similarly to other military intelligence bodies around the world, collecting foreign intelligence and working with the SVR.⁵⁷ Third, the Federal Security Service (FSB) is in charge of domestic surveillance and

⁵³ Libman, Alexander, and Björn Vollan. 2015. “Anti-Western Conspiracy Thinking and Expectations of Collusion: Evidence from Russia and China.” *BOFIT Discussion Papers*, no. 14 (May): 1–51. Pg 5.

⁵⁴ Oushakine, 72.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁵⁶ Vara, Kristin A.I. 2015. “Espionage: A Comparative Analysis.” *ILSA Journal of International & Comparative Law* 22 (1): 61–90. Pg 71.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

counterintelligence, offering services that are akin to what the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) offers to the United States.⁵⁸

The security services in Russia are some of the longest lasting organs through a tumultuous national history and some of the only entities that managed not to be destroyed by the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁵⁹ The significance of the fact that these bodies survived the collapse and rebuild of a nation speaks to the strength and power of the state security forces. The purpose and mission of Russian state security services has evaded major behavioral change since the inception of the nation when they rose to prominence under the tsars. Today, they remain at the heart of modern Russian politics.⁶⁰ Current Russian president Vladimir Putin does not attempt to hide his KGB origins and bias in his political life.⁶¹ The FSB's website boasts of its Cheka roots by posting pictures of Dzerzhinsky and Beria, who founded the Cheka and Stalin's secret police, respectively.⁶² The Cheka were those who worked for the primordial modern Russian intelligence service, the VChK, which was a secret police force designed to repress opposers to Bolshevism.⁶³ Once the Bolshevik revolution ended, Joseph Stalin reinstated the oppressive secret police forces under the name The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD).⁶⁴ After Stalin's reign of "Great Terror", the KGB came into existence with little changes other than less purging of Russian citizens.⁶⁵ However, the tradition

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Bateman, 382.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 381.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 382.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ "Secret Police." Revelations from the Russian Archives. 2016. Accessed June 25, 2019. <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/secr.html>.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

remained the same; the intelligence service “...continued to be used by the Kremlin leadership to suppress political and religious dissent.”⁶⁶ In 1991, the entire Soviet structure may have collapsed, but the intelligence structure survived, thrived, and aided in the restructuring of the Russian Federation. By serving to represses dissidence throughout history, the Russian security services ensured a lack of change in the political ideologies that ran the state.

The Dulles Plan

Supposedly the brainchild of former CIA director Allen Dulles, ‘The Dulles Plan’ is a conspiracy theory with roots in the 1940s.⁶⁷ The basis of this conspiracy theory is simple: the United States has an elaborate plan to destabilize and destroy Russia and its culture.⁶⁸ The reason this conspiracy theory helps to evaluate the level of influence these theories have on actual intelligence operations is that it is the most popular theory that encompasses the ‘us-against-them’ mentality. ‘The Dulles Plan’ is so popular in Russia that scholars used it to support testimony in a court case brought against human rights groups because of their “destabilizing” actions towards Russia.⁶⁹ Because an original document was never unearthed, there is some skepticism as to the plan’s veracity, even in Russia.⁷⁰ However, instead of using this as grounds for dismissal of the theory, some Russian scholars conclude that the theory’s veracity is unimportant. “[v]arious elements of the document’s form are anachronistic, but essentially draws the conclusion

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Fedor, 843.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 844.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

that it should nevertheless be treated as an authentic historical source because in terms of its content, it offers an accurate reflection of the US attitude towards Russia, true to the spirit if not the letter.”⁷¹ The widespread belief and use of ‘The Dulles Plan’ suggests that even if there is no proof of veracity, a conspiracy theory can have the power to influence government functioning. However, in most cases with ‘The Dulles Plan’, these effects appeared mostly at low levels of government courts or official news media. This theory is one of the best cited and most popular in Russia, and yet there was no evidence of it affecting the creation of foreign policy or intelligence operations. Because of this, it is unlikely that other lesser-known conspiracy theories would affect these areas of government.

In terms of this research study, what ‘The Dulles Plan’ does reveal is that this conspiracy theory has contributed to revisionist history through its use by ex-KGB officers to explain the collapse of the USSR.⁷² Thus, it can be concluded that conspiracy theories do have the power to influence public opinion and contribute to the spread of disinformation, even if the government itself does not create them. The plan has been used to explain an intrinsic American abhorrence towards Russia that transcends ideological differences. The plan’s popularity among chekists shows that “...this [the Dulles Plan] fits into a broader trend whereby the KGB’s role in the events leading to the collapse of the Soviet Union is being re-cast, such that the KGB is absolved of blame for these events.”⁷³ Thus, whereas it is clear that this conspiracy theory sits at the forefront of the chekists’ explanation for the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is not clear that current

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid*, 845.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 847.

Russian leaders hold this belief. The research does not support the hypothesis that conspiracy theories affect the creation of intelligence operations carried out by Russia against the West. Instead, it is more likely that the collapse of the Soviet Union and conspiracy theories like ‘The Dulles Plan’ gave the security apparatus the opportunity to cloak itself in common conspiratorial rhetoric in order to avoid the seemingly inevitable change to the institution that recovering from the collapse should have prompted.

Some of the pitfalls of dealing with this inevitability are addressed in Sabri Hammadi’s article, “Gorbachev Held Responsible for USSR Collapse: Is What Gorbachev Has Done a Gamble or a Conspiracy?”. Hammadi is of Middle Eastern heritage and is writing from the Russian perspective in a Russian publication.⁷⁴ He addresses the fact that in post-Soviet Russia there was confusion as to how Mikhail Gorbachev was to blame for the collapse.

Observers have the right to assume that Gorbachev was honest, sincere, and serious in his attempt to correct the course of the USSR and remedy its far-reaching crisis, which exacerbated before 1991. However, what happened this year, particularly the suspect and orchestrated August coup, prompts one to have suspicions about Gorbachev. This is because this coup aimed to liquidate the military and civilian elements within the Soviet leadership who stood against the dismantlement of the USSR and against subservience to the imperialist West.⁷⁵

Hammadi’s article, written in 1991, highlights perfectly the struggle that arose in Russia at the time when government officials and citizens alike were attempting to make sense of the collapse. Many believed that Gorbachev’s closeness with the West, his sudden

⁷⁴ Hammadi, Sabri. 1991. "Gorbachev Held Responsible for USSR Collapse: Is What Gorbachev Has Done a Gamble or a Conspiracy?" *Baghdad AL-THAWRAH*, December 27, 1991. Translated in *Daily Report. Near East & South Asia*, no. FBIS-NES-92-005, January 8, 1992: 23-24. *Readex: The Cold War: Global Perspectives on East-West Tensions, 1945-1991*. Pg 8.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

acquisition of wealth, and higher levels of popularity in the West than in the USSR were sure signs of his status as a Western pawn.⁷⁶ These beliefs were largely supported by the spread of conspiracy theories in post-Soviet Russia.

The fabrication of the Dulles Plan also enables the construction of a new historical narrative which re-casts the Soviet defeat in the Cold War as a 'moral victory' for Russia. It makes it possible to re-tell the history of the Cold War as a morality play, in which the Russian side can lay claim to the moral high ground, but without being forced to rely on discredited and obsolete Soviet discursive strategies for doing so. This is a narrative that could not otherwise be sustained on the basis of the genuine primary available evidence.⁷⁷

This analysis by Julie Fedor of the post-Soviet conspiracy environment shows that although these theories were pervasive yet not easily supported by actual evidence, they were still regarded as authentic reasons behind the collapse.⁷⁸ In the midst of post-collapse confusion, the inability to gather enough factual evidence to support such claims did not act as deterrent for their existence.

Discussion

The above research yielded information disproving the beginning hypothesis for this research, that Russian revisionist thinking regarding the collapse of the Soviet Union influences contemporary Russian intelligence decision making and operational frameworks. However, there are two original ideas that were supported. First, the evolution of the structure of Russia's intelligence services has failed to change the behavior of those services. While the organizations' names and organizational structures

⁷⁶ Hammadi, 8.

⁷⁷ Fedor, 848-849.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 844.

have changed over time, the underlying *modus operandi* remained the same: suppressing political dissidence, protecting those in charge, and maintaining Russian way of life as seen by the current ruler. Second, Russia's unique history created an environment in which an 'us-against-them' world view and conspiracy thinking are prevalent.

The scholarship used in support of this research study affirms the fact that former Russian state security officials have disseminated conspiratorial rhetoric. For example, in her article, Fedor cites the publications of multiple ex-KGB colonels, Major Generals, officers, Russian historians, and media commentators.⁷⁹ Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the incentive to continue this behavior was high, even though it was dishonest, because it preserved the regime. Institutional change comes slowly and because this 'us-against-them' ideology was institutionally ingrained since the inception of the country, abandoning it was unlikely. Thus, the payoff for misreporting and maintaining the status quo was high. These theories became Russia's truth when they were publicized and repeated. As Gleb Tsipursky outlines, this type of thinking is the illusory truth effect in action.⁸⁰ It is clear that Russia is not immune to these physiological phenomena, especially in times of political, economic, and social catastrophe.

The baseline for most conspiracy theories regarding the collapse of the Soviet Union is that the West aimed to destroy Soviet ideology and culture so the spread of democracy could take over. "Conspiracy theories possess an important communicative function by helping unite the audience as 'the people' against the imagined 'Other', represented as a secretive 'power bloc'".⁸¹ These theories help place blame on a third

⁷⁹ Fedor, 843-851.

⁸⁰ Tsipursky, 33.

⁸¹ Yablokov, Ilya. 2015. "Conspiracy Theories as a Russian Public Diplomacy Tool: The Case of Russia Today (RT)." *Politics* 35 (3/4): 301–15. doi:10.1111/1467-9256.12097. Pg 302.

party. The assessment by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections”, mentions the age-old battle of world views between the United States and Russia. In this report, the American Intelligence Community concludes that “Russian efforts to influence the 2016 US presidential election represent the most recent expression of Moscow’s longstanding desire to undermine the US-led liberal democratic order...”.⁸² This assessment from the Western view is intriguing because it shows that the U.S. also perceives the Russians as seeking to destroy the American way of life. The phrasing also implies that this war has been in existence for generations and recent Russian efforts are stronger than they have been in the past.

Alexander Libman and Björn Vollan conducted a research study aimed at finding levels of anti-Western conspiracy thinking in closed societies, such as Russia and China, and discerning how this affects behavior amongst these individuals. In the case of Russia, they found that while this type of thinking was pervasive, it did not necessarily correlate with a change in behavior towards fellow Russians.

We demonstrate that anti-Western conspiracy thinking has a strong effect on a subject’s behavior in China; those believing in conspiracies are less likely to expect collusion among people with whom they interact. We explain this result by the link between anti-Western conspiracy thinking and stronger in-group feeling. For Russia, we find no significant effect of anti-Western conspiracy thinking on behavior, which we explain thusly: due to the overall low level of trust in the Russian society the in-group feeling remains low, in spite of the widespread belief in Western conspiracies.⁸³

⁸² National Intelligence Council. "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections." *Office of the Director of National Intelligence*, January 6, 2017. Accessed June 24, 2019. https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf. Pg ii.

⁸³ Libman, 5-6.

These results are significant for three reasons. Firstly, Libman and Vollan found that levels of trust amongst Russians is so low, that even though anti-Western conspiracy theories are pervasive, it does not affect how Russians interact with one another. Secondly, it shows that their level of trust for one another is almost as low as it is for foreigners. Thirdly, Libman and Vollan's findings refute the idea posited earlier in this paper that culturally ingrained conspiracy theories affect how individuals act, and by extension, run their government. Thus by extension, prolonged exposure of individuals to these types of conspiracy theories would not affect the functioning of the Russian intelligence community.

Some areas of this research were impossible to explore because of uncontrollable conditions. For example, examining the inner governmental, intelligence, and social structure of a nation with a partially closed society was difficult. Not only are many aspects of these organs classified or highly difficult to access even for a Russian national, but they are even more so for an American citizen. Additionally, despite there being many databases with genuine Russian governmental documents, there is a dearth of documents that address Russian failures directly, which makes it difficult to determine an exact anti-Western view on the Soviet collapse. Yegor Gaidar notes how difficult it was for him to publish his book with this same roadblock standing in his way. "Similarly, access to documents about the Soviet collapse is becoming increasingly restricted, but we were still able to make public a number of them that can properly explain what happened to our country." The best publicly available Russian information for this research study was public opinion polls. Thus, there is extant information that would have been helpful

in this project, but is insurmountably difficult to access for an American student without a Russian security clearance.

While the scholarship has generally agreed on the more empirical aspects of this research study, such as the underlying psychological science of conspiratorial thinking and history as it was written from both the Western and non-Western perspectives, the inability to access inner Russian information made the more theoretical connections are burdensome to prove.

Conclusion

The original research question driving this research study was: How does Russian revisionist thinking beginning after the collapse of the Soviet Union influence contemporary Russian intelligence decision making and operational frameworks? At the starting point of this research, the hypothesis stated that Russian revisionist thinking began after the collapse of the Soviet Union and influences contemporary Russian intelligence decision making and operational frameworks. However, after examining the history of conspiracy theories, the psychology behind them, the history of Russia's intelligence structures and behaviors, and the connection between conspiracy theories and government, this hypothesis proved to be unsupported. The collapse of the USSR did not serve as the starting point for conspiratorial thinking in Russia. However, Russia's failure and traumatic experiences in 1991 did act as the catalyst for the popularization of most anti-Western conspiracy theories in the late 20th Century. Furthermore, the conspiracy theories about the collapse did not have enough traction to affect the behavior or functioning of intelligence or at any level of government. Ultimately, the research

attempted and failed to provide a direct lineage from Russia's history, its world view, and the behavior of its intelligence services to the Non-Western-based reasoning for the collapse of the Soviet Union. Instead, the research supported the idea that these conspiracy theories continued an ideological war between Russia and the West that had existed for generations before the collapse.

Through this research, it is clear that the revisionist and conspiratorial thinking that popped up after the collapse of the USSR does not directly affect the operational framework of modern intelligence. Instead, the collapse revealed and validated something about Russian tradition and society that was not clear in the early stages of this research. This is that the state security system's core mission has remained largely unchanged and has driven the course of politics, society, and even the economy since the time of the 14th century. The collapse did not create a new revisionist-thinking framework, but instead provided another instance in which the age-old paranoid frameworks were applicable. The fact that the intelligence structure and state security services were the only entities to survive the collapse of the Soviet Union shows that their presence was vital to the reconstruction of the nation.⁸⁴ Although the structures of the entities was changed significantly after the fall, the underlying behaviors did not change. National leaders prioritized the survival of these entities because without them, the fundamental essence of the Russian state would cease to exist.

Another goal of this research was providing a new understanding of Russian intelligence behavior that could better tailor the intelligence operations of adversarial nations such as the United States to Russia. After discovering no support for the link

⁸⁴ Bateman, 382.

posited in the original hypothesis, it is unlikely that this research could provide any such framework for U.S. intelligence to improve its operations against Russia. However, the fact that there is enough historical evidence to show the constant, unchanging nature of Russia's intelligence behavior and the state's dependence upon this apparatus for survival is all the more helpful in understanding its contemporary *modus operandi*. Although many regimes have risen and fallen, such as the tsars and the Soviets, the state security apparatus has been one constant. Now, it holds as much influence in the government of the Russian Federation as it has in different regimes throughout history. Instead of trying to understand how the collapse of the Soviet Union changed the contemporary Russian intelligence structure and how this can help American intelligence officials, there is more evidence to support the utility in understanding that it has not changed since this event but continued a legacy extant from the 14th century. Intelligence and state security is and has always been the crux of the Russian state.

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Curriculum Vita

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